

January 22, 2008

To the Honorable Members of the State of Michigan House Judiciary Committee:

My name is Raynard L. Ross. I am an adjunct Criminal Justice instructor, former police officer, and current manager for the 17<sup>th</sup> Circuit Court in Kent County for whom I am charged with the supervision of the Kent County Juvenile Detention Center.

In the various roles listed above I have vast experiences in seeking to apprehend murderers and conducting research and study on acts and actions of crime and criminals. But most importantly I now work to prevent juveniles from becoming murderers and/or life long criminals themselves. These professional experiences have given me insight into some essential traits and qualities associated with rehabilitation.

I am here today, along with a sampling of some concerned Criminal Justice students and Michigan citizens, to speak on behalf of the Mound Road Correctional Facility Juvenile Lifers and to strongly support the four House Bills being discussed today. Particularly, bills numbered 4402 and 4405. Our direct experiences with the Mound Road Juvenile Lifers has firmly entrenched our belief that juveniles that have committed the most heinous of acts can indeed be rehabilitated. We are not at this hearing to say that we support the possible parole release of all of these men. We are only dedicated to making certain that these men get the opportunity to be judged on a case-by-case basis by our current system of parole or possibly via a specialized parole board for juvenile offenders such as the one established by the State of Kentucky.

The reasons for our support are many. Most of which you have heard from local to international leadership organizations such as Second Chance Legislation, the ACLU,

Amnesty International, and the United Nations. As such I will not waste the committees time by reviewing these arguments. However, considering this hearing is a part of the State of Michigan legislative process I would be remiss not to mention that according to a Wayne State University study, only five percent of Michigan resident's surveyed support the current law that provides for juveniles to be sentenced to life in prison without the possibility of parole. This is but one factual piece of information of which you have certainly been made aware by various other sources and entities.

We are here to offer information that you have unlikely been privy to, information that directly indicates the quality of character possessed by many of the men who were sentenced as boys to die in our state's prisons; men that I, and the students accompanying me, have met and corresponded with. I personally have made the two-hour trek regularly for the past year to meet with the Juvenile Lifers at the Mound Road Correctional Facility. The majority of the twenty five or so men that make up this group are not only "ideal" prisoners as indicated by a low level of disciplinary action or tickets directed at them. They are also, and more importantly, remorseful, community minded individuals. These men have not sat idly, waiting to die or blaming an illogical, twisted state system for their current state of incarceration. Instead, these men have taken the independent initiative to be involved in positive activities. Not only have they obtained education and trade skills. They have also organized themselves to provide and initiate many acts of community service from within the walls of their prison. Examples of these range from relatively random acts of kindness such as sacrificing their meager earnings of less than a dollar a day to provide food and clothing for the poor and homeless of Detroit, to more direct initiatives like an anti-gun violence campaign directed towards teens and a Family

Therapy Initiative for the families of their victims; an initiative for the purpose of helping these families to obtain closure that may have escaped them for any number of years.

These are steps that some juvenile lifers have taken to combat the many woes and deficiencies ailing our communities; woes and deficiencies that cannot be solved by continuing to provide walking death sentences to our youth. We are one of only three nations in the world to provide for such sentences. Of the thirty-nine states that institute these sentences, nine have current legislation to abolish this nonsensical practice that provides no documented benefit to our society. In fact, countless studies indicate that acts of murder committed by juveniles have only increased along with the increase of such sentencing over the past twenty years. Furthermore, in 2002 the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Atkins v. Virginia* that the death penalty for acts committed as a juvenile constituted cruel and unusual punishment. Based on that precedence, does the same rational not apply in regards to the drawn out death sentences that 340 individuals serving life without the possibility of parole for acts committed as juveniles are serving today in our great state? As a committee, it is your duty to provide your legislative colleagues at least an opportunity to more closely examine these four bills as they more closely reflect the actual views of the majority of both yours and their constituents.

Let us not be continually fooled into believing that the lifelong incarceration of these juvenile offenders makes our state a safer place to live. The majority of these individuals were first time offenders. Their single acts of crime were indeed harsh but most often were the result of immature, illogical, and spurious thinking. We are providing hands on testimony that these people are not the “worst of the worst” or the “super predators” that they have been identified as being. We further invite any undecided

committee members to take the opportunity to accompany us into the bowels of the Mound Road Facility to meet with and look into the eyes of those that could be affected by the furthering of these bills. Afterwards you will be able to make your own assessment as to the character of these boys that have now grown to be men.

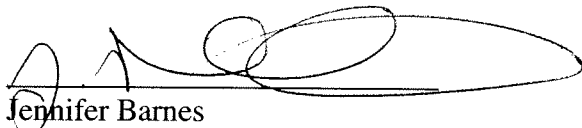
We thank the committee for its time and energy in this process. If we may continue our civic duty by being of further assistance please do not hesitate to call upon us at any time and for any reason for this most purposeful of causes.

Respectfully Submitted by,

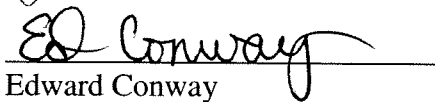


Raynard L. Ross

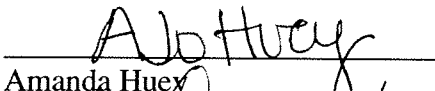
[Raynard.ross@kentcountymi.gov](mailto:Raynard.ross@kentcountymi.gov)



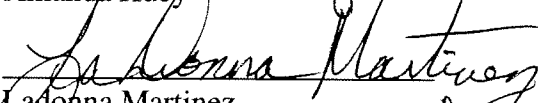
Jennifer Barnes



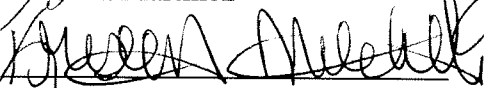
Edward Conway



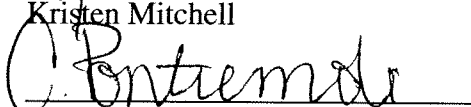
Amanda Huey



Ladonna Martinez



Kristen Mitchell



Connie Pontremoli